Mural Paintings in Urban Transit Hubs: A Case Study of Kanpur Metro Stations

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Abstract

Mural painting is one of the oldest forms of artistic expression, with its origins traceable from prehistoric cave art such as that found in the Altamira Caves to the refined visuals of the modern world. In India, this tradition has continued through ancient cave paintings like those at Ajanta and Ellora , evolving over time while retaining its cultural significance. In contemporary urban spaces, particularly metro stations, mural art has re-emerged as a vibrant form of public art. This study focuses on the mural paintings at metro stations in Kanpur, examining their thematic diversity, artistic techniques, and socio-cultural relevance. Using both primary and secondary data, the research analyzes murals at nine major metro stations in the city. The findings reveal that these artworks not only communicate spiritual, cultural, and social messages but also contribute meaningfully to the creation of a visually engaging and cohesive urban environment.

Keywords: Mural Paintings, Public Art, Kanpur Metro Stations, Urban Beautification, Cultural Preservation.

Received: 8/4/2025
Published: 8/31/2025
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Introduction:

Mural art is among the oldest and most enduring forms of visual communication, providing a means through which humans have expressed their inner thoughts, cultural beliefs, and communal identities for thousands of years. From the prehistoric cave paintings of Altamira in Spain to the richly detailed murals of Ajanta and Ellora in India, mural painting has served as both a narrative and decorative art form rooted in its spatial context. In early human societies, cave walls served as canvases, with natural pigments applied to rock surfaces to create symbolic representations of everyday life, spirituality, and myth.

In the Indian context, the tradition of mural painting has continued from the prehistoric period through classical and medieval eras into the present day. Sites such as Bhimbetka, Badami, Bagh, Tanjore, Madurai, and Kerala showcase India's deep connection with this art form. Ancient literary texts like the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Natyashastra, and Harshacharita further affirm the historical and cultural significance of murals in India. Over time, while political, religious, and artistic influences led to shifts in style and medium, mural painting persisted as an essential cultural expression—seen in temples, homes, and public buildings.

In recent years, mural art has experienced a revival in urban spaces, including transportation infrastructure such as metro stations. These modern murals not only enhance the visual aesthetics of public environments but also reinforce local identity and cultural continuity. Cities such as Delhi, Kochi, and now Kanpur have adopted mural painting as part of their metro development projects, transforming otherwise utilitarian spaces into vibrant cultural landscapes.

Murals are broadly classified into two main types: painting-based murals and sculpture-based (relief) murals. Both forms offer distinct techniques and aesthetic outcomes:

Techniques of Mural Art:

1. Painting-Based Murals

Fresco Buono (True Fresco): In this classical technique, water-based pigments are applied to freshly laid lime plaster. As the plaster dries, the colors chemically bond with the surface, resulting in a durable and long-lasting mural. This method was widely used in ancient Indian caves such as Ajanta.

Fresco Secco (Dry Fresco): In this method, pigments are applied to dry plaster using binding agents like gum, glue, or oil. Though less permanent than true fresco, it allows for greater flexibility in detailing and touch-ups.

Mosaic Murals: These are made by assembling small, colored pieces of stone, glass, or ceramic tiles into intricate patterns or images. Mosaic murals are highly durable and often used in public art installations due to their resistance to weather and wear.

Oil Painting Murals: Here, pigments are mixed with oil (such as linseed oil) and applied directly to walls or other stable surfaces. This method allows for rich textures, vibrant colors, and fine detailing, though it is more time-consuming and sensitive to surface preparation.

Sculpture-Based (Relief) Murals

Sculpture-based murals, also known as relief murals, involve creating three-dimensional designs that are either carved directly onto wall surfaces or mounted as sculpted panels. These can be created using a variety of materials such as stone, clay, cement, wood, metal, or fiberglass. Unlike painted murals, relief murals emphasize form, depth, and texture, offering a tactile experience. They are often used to depict narratives or iconography in temples, heritage buildings, and increasingly, in modern public architecture.

A notable example of this technique is found in some of the murals at Kanpur Metro Stations, where the mosaic and relief methods have been effectively used to merge traditional symbolism with contemporary design. These artworks serve not only as decorative elements but also as cultural landmarks that engage commuters and preserve local heritage.

Modern murals at Kanpur stations predominantly utilize tile mosaic techniques, divided into: Positive Mosaic Murals – Images directly pasted onto surfaces. Negative Mosaic Murals – Designed digitally, assembled in sections, and then installed. These methods offer durability and resistance to weather and pollution.

Literature Review:

Mural art in India holds a profound place in the visual and spiritual landscape of temple architecture. As both a medium of religious expression and aesthetic tradition, murals have long served to narrate mythological themes, deify sacred figures, and transform temple spaces into immersive spiritual environments. Scholars have increasingly examined the function, symbolism, and transformation of mural art within this context—particularly in historically rich centers such as Mathura.

In '*Mathura ke Mandiron mein Chitrit Devta Chitra – Ek Sameekshatmak Adhyayan*,' Smt. Rekha Gupta presents a critical exploration of mural depictions of deities on temple walls in Mathura. She underscores how these murals are not only artistic renderings but also serve as tools for devotional engagement. Gupta draws attention to the way in which Hindu devotees, much like early Buddhists who popularized their faith through depictions of the Buddha, have utilized the walls of temples to artistically render their deities. These murals are executed with deliberate attention to line, form, and color—each element chosen not merely for aesthetic appeal, but to

evoke bhakti (devotion) and spiritual intimacy. In doing so, these murals function as visual scriptures, offering a sacred and symbolic representation of divine presence.

Gupta also emphasizes that these temple murals go beyond surface decoration. The spatial integration of deity figures into architectural elements reflects a holistic approach to sacred design, where the mural becomes a part of the temple's spiritual architecture. These images often follow traditional iconographic rules, yet allow room for creative expressions that reflect regional styles and devotional sentiments. The murals thus become a medium of silent communication, blending narrative, symbolism, and visual rhythm to create an atmosphere of reverence and meditation.

Complementing this traditional perspective, Dr. Alka Tiwari in her critical study titled '*Aadhunik Bhartiya ka Swaroop'* explores the changing face of Indian mural art in the contemporary era. Tiwari observes that modern mural artists are increasingly moving beyond conventional religious themes and exploring individual expression, emotional depth, and conceptual concerns. While traditional murals were tied to sacred architecture and religious function, contemporary mural art embraces new mediums and technologies, including installation art, digital formats, and mixed media practices.

Tiwari also addresses the shifting context and consumption of mural art. Once confined to temple interiors and religious settings, murals are now seen in public spaces, galleries, and urban landscapes. This change, while broadening the reach of mural practices, also introduces challenges related to authenticity, spiritual relevance, and commercial influence. However, even within these modern formats, the influence of traditional *Bhitti Chitrakala*—its motifs, themes, and compositional structures—remains deeply embedded.

Together, the works of Smt. Rekha Gupta and Dr. Alka Tiwari offer a comprehensive view of Indian mural art as a continuum of tradition and transformation. Gupta's study grounds within its original devotional and architectural setting, while Tiwari's analysis presents its evolving role in a modern, secular, and technologically advanced society. Both perspectives highlight how mural art continues to navigate between sacred tradition and artistic innovation, making it a living, adaptive form of cultural expression.

Objectives:

To critically examine the thematic content of the mural paintings installed at Kanpur Metro stations.

To analyze the artistic techniques and stylistic approaches employed in the creation of these murals.

Methodology:

This research is based on both primary and secondary data collection methods, aimed at studying the mural art present at Kanpur Metro stations.

Under the primary data collection, field visits were conducted at various Kanpur Metro stations to directly observe and visually analyze the murals in their actual setting. This enabled an in-depth understanding of the themes, techniques, and spatial integration of the artworks.

The secondary data collection involved a comprehensive review of relevant literature, including books, research papers, and published articles, to support the observational findings and to provide theoretical and contextual grounding to the study.

Kanpur; A Contextual Overview:

Kanpur, located in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, is situated on the southern bank of the Ganga River. Geographically and economically significant, it is often referred to as the industrial capital of Uttar Pradesh due to its historical and contemporary contributions to industrial development.

Historically, the foundation of Kanpur is attributed to Raja Hindu Singh of the Shakya dynasty. The city's original name was Kanhiyapur, which over time evolved into Kanpur. The region has witnessed the rule of several prominent dynasties, including the Gupta, Pala, and Mughal empires, each of which has contributed to its cultural and administrative development.

Murals have historically played a vital role in the artistic and cultural expression of India, often serving as powerful visual narratives within both sacred and public spaces. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in mural art across the country, particularly in urban contexts where it is being used to revitalize public infrastructure and reconnect communities with their cultural heritage.

Kanpur, a major industrial city in Uttar Pradesh situated on the southern bank of the Ganga River, has also embraced this movement through the integration of murals into its metro system. Recognized as the industrial capital of the state, Kanpur has witnessed significant infrastructural developments, one of the most notable being the Kanpur Metro Rail Project.

The Government of India approved the project in February 2019, and construction commenced in November of the same year. The metro service is managed by the Uttar Pradesh Metro Rail Corporation (UPMRC) and aims to provide a modern, efficient public transportation system while also reducing urban traffic congestion.

A notable feature of this metro development is the incorporation of mural art across all operational stations, blending functionality with visual aesthetics. These artworks not only enhance the physical environment but also reflect regional identity, cultural motifs, and artistic innovation.

The Orange Line, which currently runs from IIT Kanpur to Motijheel, includes nine operational stations. Each of these stations features artistically curated murals, contributing to the cultural narrative of the city and engaging daily commuters with visual storytelling. The stations include:

1. IIT Kanpur Metro Station, 2. Kalyanpur Metro Station, 3. SPM (Satyamurti Pandey) Metro Station, 4. University Metro Station, 5. Gurudev Metro Station, 6. Geetanagar Metro Station, 7. Rawatpur Metro Station, 8. LLR (Lala Lajpat Rai) Hospital Metro Station, 9. Motijheel Metro Station

These murals serve multiple functions: they beautify public transit spaces, foster civic pride, and preserve cultural continuity through contemporary artistic means. The integration of mural art into Kanpur's metro infrastructure exemplifies how urban development can harmonize with cultural expression, creating inclusive and visually enriched environments for the public.

1. IIT Metro Station:

The IIT Metro Station in Kanpur marks the starting point of the metro rail line and is strategically situated near the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kanpur. The station's exterior has been transformed through mural art that enhances both its aesthetic value and symbolic significance.

Two major murals, themed around education—particularly technical education—reflect the academic legacy of IIT Kanpur. These artworks use a deep blue palette, representing knowledge, innovation, and technological advancement. Visual motifs inspired by binary code and digital tile patterns metaphorically represent the digital era, aligning the mural with the field of information technology.

Through this artistic intervention, the station becomes a point of convergence between infrastructure, education, and art.

2. Kalyanpur Metro Station:

Following IIT Station, the Kalyanpur Metro Station features a mural that connects the urban setting to the cultural and spiritual legacy of Bithoor, a sacred town along the Ganga River.

Depicting elements such as temples, boats, and flowing water, the mural presents a narrative of everyday life within sacred geography. Soft hues of yellow and pale blue evoke spirituality and tranquility. Executed using a durable, non-reflective mosaic tile technique, the mural integrates cultural heritage with urban functionality, offering commuters a moment of reflection rooted in local identity.

3. SPM (Satyamurti Pandey) Metro Station:

Located after Kalyanpur, the SPM Metro Station features a mural that honors agrarian life. It showcases a rural landscape with a rising sun, a farmer with cattle, women at work, traditional homes, and a tractor—visuals that celebrate simplicity, harmony, and productivity.

Crafted using non-reflective mosaic tiles, the mural is both resilient and visually engaging, making it ideal for a public transport environment. It bridges urban infrastructure with rural values, offering a tribute to the roots of Indian society.

4. University Metro Station:

The University Metro Station (Figure No. 2), adjacent to institutions of higher learning, features a mural centered on intellectual aspiration and academic progress. The design shows six human figures ascending diagonally beside university buildings, symbolizing personal and collective growth through education.

The mosaic tile technique ensures visual texture and long-term durability. The mural reinforces the station’s identity as a space of academic excellence and symbolizes upward mobility and enlightenment.

5. Gurudev Metro Station:

This station’s mural showcases Kanpur’s architectural and cultural heritage, featuring iconic structures like J.K. Temple, colonial red-brick buildings, the Memorial Church, and the historic Bithoor temple complex. It also includes trees, roads, and vehicles, symbolizing the city’s evolution.

Executed with non-reflective mosaic tiles, the mural presents a visual blend of history and modernity, offering a cultural snapshot that reinforces Kanpur’s urban identity within the metro corridor.

6. Geetanagar Metro Station:

Geetanagar Station (Figure No. 3) offers a dual mural experience. One wall depicts a home set in a lush, natural landscape with an open courtyard, while the other features river scenes populated by homes, trees, and human figures engaged in daily life and folk traditions.

These complementary visuals explore the human-nature relationship, vernacular architecture, and traditional lifestyles. The mosaic tile technique ensures the murals’ durability and artistic harmony within a bustling public environment.

7. Rawatpur Metro Station:

The Rawatpur Station (Figure No. 5) features murals that convey patriotic spirit and national unity. Abstract human forms—a raised arm, a clenched fist, and open hands—are illustrated in motion, symbolizing struggle, strength, and progress.

Painted in vivid saffron, white, and green hues of the Indian national flag, the mural captures the essence of national pride. Background shades of beige and navy enhance contrast and visibility. The artwork acknowledges Kanpur's role in India's revolutionary history.

8. LLR Hospital Metro Station:

Located near a prominent medical facility, the LLR Hospital Metro Station (Figure No. 4) features murals themed around wellness and holistic health. The design shows human figures in yogic postures—walking, meditating, and stretching—highlighting the physical and mental benefits of mindfulness.

A symbolic DNA-like helix runs in the background, emphasizing the connection between biology and well-being. Indigo shades symbolize calm and awareness, while orange and yellow convey vitality and energy. The mural is contextually relevant and visually uplifting for its audience.

9. Motijheel Metro Station:

The final mural in this sequence is at Motijheel Station (Figure No. 1), which celebrates nature and ecology. Rendered in pastel blues, pinks, and greens, the mural shows a flowing river bordered by aquatic plants, birds, fishes, and lush foliage.

The artwork encourages environmental consciousness and reflects the local geography, specifically Motijheel—a prominent water body in Kanpur. Created using the mosaic tile technique, it adds serenity and beauty to the urban transit space.

Scientific and Conceptual Framework of the Murals:

The murals across Kanpur Metro stations have been developed through a scientifically informed, culturally sensitive approach. Their themes draw from traditional Indian art and iconography, integrating motifs such as lotus flowers, peacock feathers, geometric patterns, and regional emblems that symbolize continuity, vitality, and auspiciousness.

Design selection was based on detailed research and expert consultation to ensure symbolic resonance and visual coherence. Each mural was conceived not just as decoration, but as a visual text—communicating stories, values, and identities rooted in Kanpur's historical, educational, spiritual, and ecological landscape.

Through these artworks, Kanpur Metro becomes more than a transport network—it transforms into a public art gallery, enriching the daily commute and fostering civic pride.

Technical Approach to Murals at Kanpur Metro Stations:

The murals installed at various Kanpur Metro stations have been crafted using the tile mosaic technique, a method deeply rooted in history and widely regarded as a sophisticated art form since the Greco-Roman era. Over centuries, mosaic art has evolved while retaining its cultural relevance, bridging ancient traditions with contemporary public art practices.

A mosaic is a decorative or narrative composition created from small, regular or irregular fragments of colored stones, glass, or ceramics, known as tesserae. These tesserae are affixed onto surfaces such as concrete, tiles, or other substrates using appropriate adhesives. The resulting artwork is not only visually rich but also highly durable—ideal for public infrastructure like metro stations. Broadly, mosaic murals are created using two primary techniques:

Direct Mosaic Technique:

In this approach, the tesserae are directly applied to the final surface, shaping the desired visual composition in situ. This method is generally used for smaller or site-specific artworks that allow for on-location execution.

Indirect Mosaic Technique:

The murals at Kanpur Metro stations have been executed using the indirect mosaic method, which is more suitable for large-scale installations. In this process, the mural design is first developed digitally using computer software. Based on this design, tesserae are pre-arranged on a temporary backing surface in reverse order—often using adhesive patches to hold them in place.

Once the entire design is assembled, it is transferred to the final wall surface. After setting the mosaic with appropriate adhesives and allowing it to cure, the gaps between the tesserae are filled with grout, and the surface is finished. This technique ensures precision, uniformity, and high-quality finish across multiple stations.

Because of this standardized process, the tesserae used in these murals are typically small and consistent in size, contributing to a uniform aesthetic across all metro stations.

Moreover, the non-reflective mosaic tile technique used offers high resistance to environmental factors such as dust, humidity, and water exposure. As a result, the murals remain intact and visually vibrant over time, even in outdoor or high-traffic settings.

Conclusion:

Murals as an art form are increasingly recognized as a powerful medium for cultural expression and public engagement. These large-scale visual artworks provide vibrant and accessible narratives that contribute to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. In this regard, the murals installed at Kanpur Metro stations serve as significant cultural artifacts that showcase both traditional and contemporary artistic practices.

This initiative not only enhances the aesthetic environment of the metro stations but also plays a crucial role in fostering public awareness and appreciation of regional identity and heritage. The project, overseen by the Kanpur Metro Authority, strategically integrates culturally resonant themes and motifs, reflecting the historical and social ethos of the region.

By situating murals within public transit spaces, the Kanpur Metro project creates a dynamic intersection between urban infrastructure and cultural representation. This effort facilitates community participation and engagement, contributing to the sustainability of local cultural narratives in a rapidly urbanizing context.

Thus, the Kanpur Metro murals exemplify how public art can serve as a vehicle for cultural continuity, while simultaneously enriching the urban experience through artistic innovation.

Future Research:

Future research on mural art in the upcoming Kanpur metro station can provide valuable insights into how public art influences urban spaces in rapidly developing cities. Studies could examine how murals reflecting Kanpur's rich cultural heritage, industrial history, and local narratives impact commuters' connection to their city and enhance the aesthetic environment of the metro station.

Research can also explore community participation in mural creation, focusing on involving local artists, students, and residents to foster a sense of ownership and pride. Understanding the social dynamics and inclusivity of such projects can help design murals that truly represent Kanpur's diverse population.

Additionally, evaluating the effectiveness of murals in improving commuter experience, reducing stress, and promoting positive public behavior within the metro environment would offer practical insights for urban planners and policymakers.

Sustainability and maintenance challenges specific to Kanpur's climate and urban conditions should also be investigated to ensure the longevity and vibrancy of the murals.

Overall, future research in the Kanpur metro station context can guide culturally sensitive, socially inclusive, and environmentally sustainable mural initiatives that contribute to the city's urban identity and commuter satisfaction.

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Images:

Figure No. 1 – Mural of the Moti Jheel Metro Station (Self-captured image).

Figure No. 2 – Mural of the University Metro Station (Self-captured image).

Figure No. 3 – Mural of the Geetanagar Metro Station (Self-captured image)

Figure No. 4 – Mural of the LLR Metro Station (Self-captured image)

Figure No. 5 – Mural of the Rawatpur Metro Station (Self-captured image)